

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 1, 2020

The Honorable Pete Gaynor, Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street S.W.
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Administrator Gaynor:

We write to express our opposition to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) new interim policy, which ceases agency reimbursements to states for cloth face coverings and cleaning and disinfection in schools.

Health experts overwhelmingly agree that high face mask adherence and enhanced cleaning protocols are essential for limiting the spread of COVID-19 in schools. According to guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), all school reopening plans should address adherence to behaviors that prevent the spread of COVID-19.¹ Guidance from both the CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics advise that masks and the regular cleaning and disinfecting of frequently touched surfaces are important to help slow the spread of COVID-19.² In fact, CDC Director Robert Redfield recently said that "face masks are the most important, powerful public health tool we have."

Nevertheless, on September 1, FEMA issued an interim policy, reversing prior guidance which had allowed states to apply for reimbursement from FEMA for expenses associated with cleaning and disinfection and procurement of cloth face masks in school settings.³ Under the new interim policy, FEMA no longer classifies these expenses as "emergency protective measures" eligible for Public Assistance Program funds. The policy went into effect on September 15.

We are extremely concerned about the additional burden that FEMA's interim policy places on already financially strained state and local governments. Over the next two fiscal years, state governments, alone, are expected to face COVID-related budget shortfalls of \$555 billion.⁴ This reckless, last-minute decision to reverse policy, just as many schools were beginning to reopen, forces state and local governments to revise their emergency response strategies and make tough reallocation decisions.

¹ Guidance for K-12 School Administrators on the Use of Masks in Schools. Retrieved September 18, 2020, from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/cloth-face-cover.html>

² COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Re-entry. Retrieved September 18, 2020, from <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>

³ FEMA Policy FP 104-009-19

⁴ States Continue to Face Large Shortfalls Due to COVID-19 Effects. (2020, July 08). Retrieved September 18, 2020, from <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/states-continue-to-face-large-shortfalls-due-to-covid-19-effects>

We understand that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) will be providing up to 125 million cloth face masks to states for distribution to schools across the country.⁵ However, given HHS's own guidance⁶ urging disposal of cloth face masks every 15 days,⁷ it is abundantly clear that this is simply not enough masks to protect all K-12 students, teachers, and staff for the entire academic year. Moreover, the HHS announcement does nothing to offset schools' cleaning and disinfection costs.

As the 2020-2021 school year gets underway, we all feel the urgency to get our children back in the classroom. In-person instruction is unequivocally better for students' academic achievement and social and emotional learning. We must reopen our schools—but only when we can ensure the safety of our children, our families, and our surrounding communities. This new FEMA policy undermines our ability to do precisely that. We therefore urge you to amend your September 1 interim policy and resume reimbursement to states for these school safety costs.

Thank you for your consideration of this important issue. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Matthew Cartwright
Member of Congress



Donald M. Payne, Jr.
Member of Congress

Albio Sires
Member of Congress

Jesús G. “Chuy” García
Member of Congress

Bennie Thompson
Member of Congress

Terri Sewell
Member of Congress

⁵ Cloth Face Masks in Schools. Retrieved September 18, 2020, from <https://www.phe.gov/facecovering/Pages/cloth-face-masks-in-school.aspx>

⁶ Wear and Care. Retrieved September 18, 2020, from <https://www.phe.gov/facecovering/Pages/care.aspx>

⁷ Cloth face masks be washed after each use and discarded after 15 washes. One cloth mask will therefore last for 15 days of in-class instruction.

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Member of Congress

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Max Rose
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